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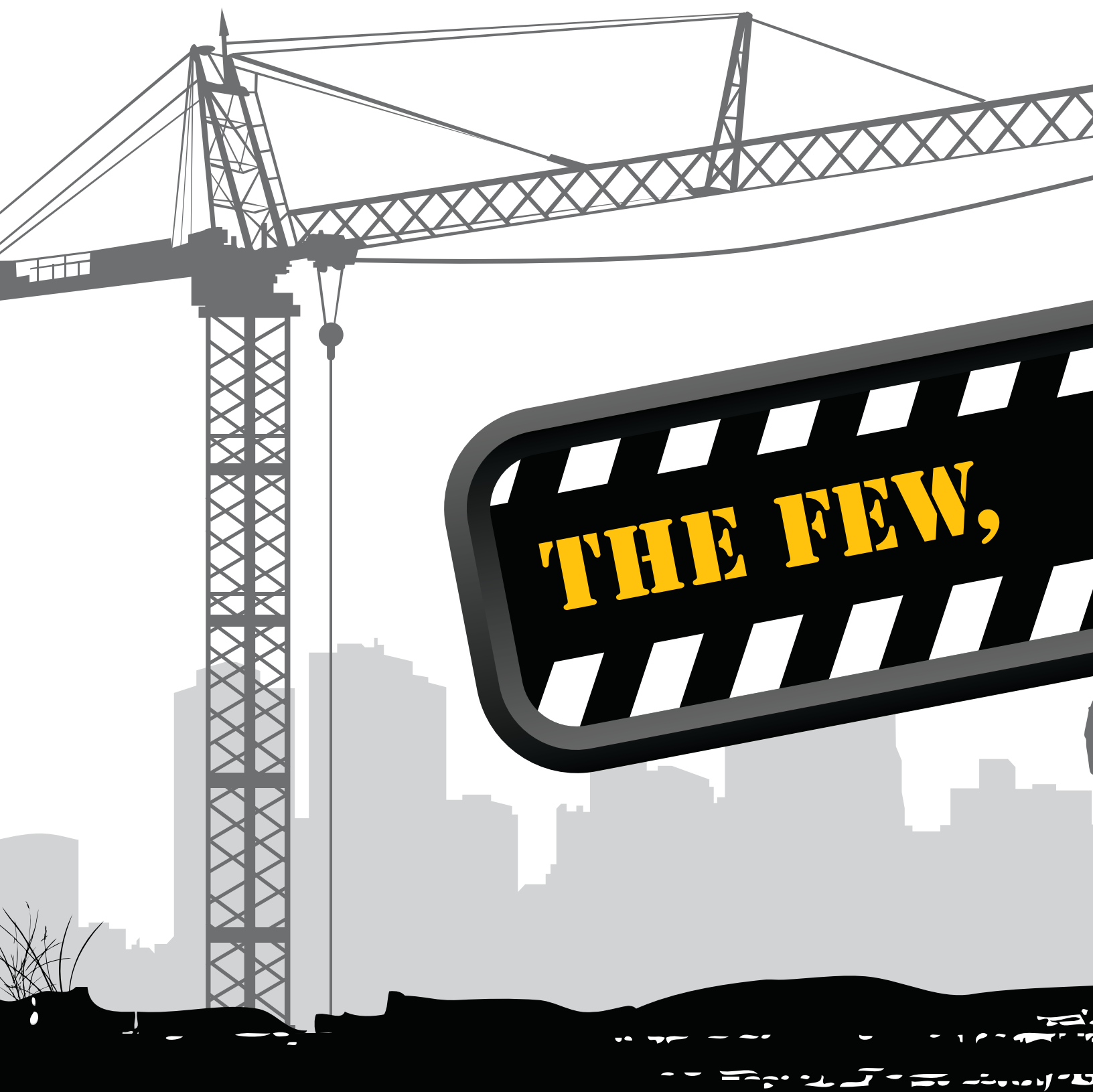
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MAGAZINE

Build It Better

Female Construction Engineers Elevate the Department's Profile







THE PROUD

Women oversee OBO construction projects

/// By Stephanie Felton, Lisa Kyriienko and Sholeh Lee



Clockwise from above: Sholeh Lee inspects the roof at the Mazar-e-Sharif Interim Consulate Project; Construction Manager Lisa Kyriienko gets ready to dig in at the Kyiv, Ukraine, new embassy construction project's groundbreaking; Construction Manager Sylvia DiPaolo participates in the groundbreaking ceremony for the Mumbai new consulate compound project, which involves the Indian tradition of prayers and breaking of a coconut, in this case on the drill digging the foundation.

Of the 13,008 members of the Foreign Service, 76 are construction engineers, and of those only 10 are women. That 13 percent ratio may not sound like much, but it's better than the U.S. industry average.

To provide a support network for the small number of women in the industry, the National Association of Women in Construction was founded in 1953 for what founding member Alice Ashley called women "with electricity in our veins, cement dust on our shoes, sawdust on our minds...busy, busy, busy, filthy things."

In April 1978, the Department of Labor set goals and timetables for hiring women on federally financed construction projects, aiming to boost female representation in construction trades to 6.9 percent of the workforce in three years. By 2006, it was

still only 4 percent, although the percentage of women in construction management was slightly higher. 2009 Census Bureau data show fewer than 10 percent of construction management professionals were women.

Significant Roles

Construction engineering became a Foreign Service specialty in 1979, and Claudia Russell was the only woman in the inaugural class. She recently addressed the female FS construction engineers, telling them "you are in significant roles to further the best interests of our country, our professions and our gender. As role models to the world, you have exciting opportunities."

Like their male counterparts, each FS female construction engineer has at least five years' experience and a bachelor's

degree in engineering, architecture or construction management. Many are also licensed as professional engineers and registered architects.

The Department's construction engineers and architects manage billions of dollars of construction work that the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations has under way at diplomatic posts abroad.

Female Foreign Service construction engineers say they are challenging cultural stereotypes and succeeding in a nontraditional career. Many were the only females in their college technical courses. They tell OBO that with job knowledge and hard work they know they will be recognized as equals to their male counterparts.

However, most also say that at the beginning of a project they must overcome



Clockwise from left: Observing the placement of rebar at the construction site in Sanaa, Yemen, are from left Construction Manager Chuck Kahles and Project Director Tracy Thomas; Stephanie Felton, right, discusses a storm drain manhole in Freetown, Sierra Leone, with facilities engineer Benjamin Kamara, far left, and an engineering consultant; Lithuanian and American Girl Scouts gather at the American Embassy Chancery Rehabilitation and Addition Project in Vilnius. Project Director Tamela Simpson is at far right.



the hurdle of defining oneself not by gender, but by ability, experience and expertise. Many female construction engineers overseas say they see themselves representing the important American value of gender equality. They say they demonstrate to hundreds of foreign nationals on the job site that female engineers can be entrusted with the important job of managing new embassy construction projects.

Mentoring Women

The female construction engineers mentor younger women at home and abroad. Tamela Simpson, director of an OBO project in Vilnius, hosted a tour of her project by American and Lithuanian Girl Scouts who learned about construction methods and safety and earned their

architecture merit badges. Construction Manager Leslie Taggart was featured by the organization Federally Employed Women as a successful female role model, in part because of her volunteer work with the National Urban League, where she encourages young people to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

The Department's four female construction project directors are May Stephens in Djibouti, Tamela Simpson in Jakarta, Leslie Taggart in Karachi and Tracy Thomas in Sanaa. There are also three female construction managers assigned worldwide: Deya Desouza in Djibouti, Wendy Simonson in Manila and Stephanie Felton in Santo Domingo. Three other female construction engineers are now on domestic tours

before going overseas: Silvia DiPaolo, Lisa Kyriienko and Sholeh Lee.

Managing a large overseas diplomatic construction project is complex and demanding. Because men historically represent the construction industry, female FS construction engineers say it's important to serve as role models for the next generation of women, setting a path for others to follow.

Adam Namm, OBO's acting director, said the bureau is proud of this diversity because it creates balance, fosters teamwork and provides a positive image of women in construction worldwide. ■

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